

# Preparing the NCO Corps for the 21st century

By LTC Frederick J. Maxwell, SC

**T**oday's environment presents tremendous new challenges to the military professional. The Army's role, simply to fight and win wars, is no longer as clear. According to Amos A. Jordan, Jr. in his article "Officer Education" in the *Handbook of Military Institutions*, the military vocation may be defined as "the management and application of military resources in deterrent, peacekeeping, and combat roles in the context of technological, social and political change." Based upon this definition, today's professional Soldier may serve in many diverse roles. The Army is changing to serve in these roles better.

During his statement to Congress about Army transformation on March 8, 2000, General Eric K. Shinseki stated that Army Vision 2020 calls for a transformation to a force that will that will be more responsive, deployable, agile, versatile, lethal, survivable and sustainable than the current force. The transformation objective is to develop and field a force that embodies the decisive warfighting capabilities found in today's heavy forces and the strategic responsiveness found in today's light forces.

**The NCO's role.** To be successful, quality leadership of small units is more important than ever. If the U.S. Army is to be recognized as a great army in all respects, senior leaders must recognize and acknowledge the vital and primary functions of the NCO Corps. In any army, the NCO is the critical element in integrating the enlisted Soldiers into the organization. This integration includes melding the Soldiers with the unit's officers, weapons, organizational objectives and the goals and values for which the unit is prepared to fight. *Field Manual 22-600-20, The Army NCO Guide* affirms this basic function of the NCO. "Sergeants must have the skill, ability and leadership to train Soldiers for combat and lead them in combat ... fire teams, squads, crews, gun sections ... fight together as teams, using their equipment to high standards of excellence."

Historically, the role of the NCO has been to provide leadership and training to junior enlisted Soldiers. Sergeants provide the essential link between the commander and his Soldiers. While this role is not changing, the NCO no longer can expect to be successful with basic leadership skills and training ability as were his predecessors. Further, with the Army's expanded roles in today's world, NCOs must have knowledge, training and technical as well as interpersonal skills on a much greater scale. They also must be more adaptive and have a greater depth of insight than in the past.

In today's highly publicized military operations, we are bombarded with media accounts of American Soldiers "walking point" — that is, in the forefront of military operations across the full spectrum

of military operations. They must deal with situations and events that have the potential for immediate, worldwide consequences. For example, a squad leader responsible for a checkpoint might have to make decisions with second- or third-order effects. In the 21st century, professional military education alone is not sufficient to develop NCOs to deal with both their traditional military roles as leaders and trainers and nontraditional roles as *de facto* policy makers.

**Historical background.** As the Civil War often is described as the first modern war, World War I could be considered the first technological war. The Army created technical specialists who trained and supervised Soldiers in newly emergent technical occupations, such as radio operators, truck drivers and mechanics (See the Center for Military History's book *Time Honored Professionals: The NCO Corps Since 1775*).

The increased use of technology in warfare opened a division between NCOs who were troop leaders and those who were specialists. Often, young Soldiers with special technical skills received NCO status and higher pay than troop leaders with many more years of service and experience. This, consequently, impacted the morale of the combat leader. Compared to their British and French counterparts, the hastily promoted American NCOs were only half-trained. In response, General John J. Pershing directed the establishment of special schools for sergeants to improve small-unit leadership and NCO professionalism (*Professionals*, 14). Although this was a step in the right direction, unfortunately, the sergeants' schools were held only within the American Expeditionary Forces in France, and they were discontinued after the Armistice.

Although some leadership training was made a part of unit training cycles before deployment, special schools for NCOs were not revived during World War II. In 1947, the Army opened an NCO academy system in occupied Germany. The intent of the program of instruction was to develop service-wide standards for NCO education. This one-month course stressed leadership skills such as map reading and methods of small unit training. While the course content was useful, some major problems remained unsolved. Too few academies were opened to reach most NCOs, the quality of instruction was uneven and the academies prospered or suffered depending upon the changing budgets of parent commands.

The rapid expansion of the Army during the Vietnam War allowed little time for training and seasoning of NCOs. As a result, the Army expanded its NCO schools to produce great numbers of enlisted leaders. Individuals who had leadership skills were identified during Advanced Individual Training and, upon graduation from a short course, were awarded sergeant stripes. These sergeants often experienced difficulty in gaining acceptance from other, "hard stripe" NCOs. Derisively nicknamed "Shake-and-Bakes," they had not earned their stripes based on experience and the proverbial "school of hard knocks."

**History of the NCO Education System.** Shortages of trained NCOs during the Vietnam era led to the development of the Army's NCO Education System. Implemented in 1971, NCO

Education System offered a three-level educational progression including both military occupational specialty-specific and nonspecific stages (*Professionals*, 13). The Army Training Program, used since World War I, was time-oriented, and the Army needed programs that required Soldiers to train to standards. The Skill Qualifications Test replaced military occupational specialty tests to give an indicator of Soldier proficiency in 1977. In 1980, the Self Development Test replaced Skill Qualifications Test with the intent of NCOs taking more responsibility for their own military occupational specialty and leadership development.

The Training and Doctrine Command established a progressive and sequential NCO Education System aimed at giving NCOs more attractive career opportunities while providing the Army with more capable NCOs. With the transition to the all volunteer Army in 1973, the NCO Education System expanded to include military occupational specialty and professional education. While NCO Education System improved the NCO Corps' competence, it did not give clear patterns of career development and promotion potential. The Enlisted Personnel Management System, introduced in 1975, resolved some of those issues.

The Enlisted Personnel Management System expanded professional opportunities while at the same time improving skill levels. It eliminated "dead-end" career fields by grouping together related specialties, thus opening career paths from E1 to E9 for all Soldiers. At the same time, to remain eligible for promotion, Soldiers had to demonstrate their abilities at required levels through Skill Qualifications Tests.

In 1980, Training and Doctrine Command introduced another professional system related to career management. The NCO Development Plan amounted to formal NCO leadership training. A "doing" rather than "testing" experience, the NCO Development Plan enables NCOs to apply the training and skills learned in NCO Education System and Enlisted Personnel Management System in their own units. A major reason for the effectiveness of the NCO Development Plan is its relation to tradition. NCOs had exchanged information on their duties informally for more than 200 years. With the NCO Development Plan, sergeants gather in more formal sessions to examine professional topics usually within their units.

**Army training.** The Army offers about 240 distinct military occupational specialties to enlisted personnel. The Army is focused on the post-Cold War era and has assumed roles of peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance. This is also a time of vastly reduced budgets and increased operating tempo. These factors naturally challenge our NCOs, who are responsible for individual training at the unit level.

Army training often is characterized as being event driven with units and their commanders (and trainers) looking forward only to the next major event, such as the next rotation to the National Training Center, Fort Irwin, Calif., or to an operation overseas. Short-term priorities dominate. Unit proficiency, professional knowledge, teamwork and small-unit leadership do not grow and do not have a long-term cumulative effect on unit performance. Instead, there appears to be a series of short-term efforts to hold the system off, to hold assignments steady and to train for an upcoming event (e.g., six months' preparation for the next deployment). After this period, the short-term rules, in effect during the preparation phase, are relaxed, and the system reasserts itself with massively disruptive effects on any unit proficiency gained. The treadmill then continues with the commander rapidly refocusing on a new short-term event with new people and new priorities.

**Army training methodologies must change.** Army transformation was built upon full-spectrum dominance. To be successful in the future, the Army needs leaders who are

CSM Tory Guimond, command sergeant major of the Wyoming Army National Guard's 2nd Battalion, 300th Field Artillery Regiment, works on his skills with an M4 carbine at Fort Hood, Texas, May 23. (Photo by 2LT Christian Venhuizen, U.S. Army)



# Generational developments



**The Baby Boomers Generation was shaped by events such as the assassination of President Kennedy. Pictured is Kennedy's funeral procession leaving the White House for St. Matthew's Cathedral, Nov. 25, 1963. (Photo courtesy of the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum)**



**Generation X was shaped by events such as Operation Desert Storm. Pictured are M-198 155-mm howitzers of the 18th Field Artillery Brigade firing on the first day of the ground offensive in southern Iraq, Feb. 24, 1991. (Photo by SGT Nathan Webster, U.S. Army)**



**Generation D (digital) is being shaped by the digital revolution and the ability to communicate instantly without physical contact through email, blogs and short messages called tweets.**

to act with speed, precision and confidence. Ever-changing missions and unforeseen shapes of the areas of military operations decry the need for NCOs who are adaptive, innovative, flexible and “in tune” with their surroundings.

As former Sergeant Major of the Army, Silas L. Copeland said, “It will take the hearts, hands, and heads of every Soldier to build a better Army (See “The Sergeant Major of Army talks to the troops man to man” in the December 1971 edition of *Soldiers*). Never in history has the role of the sergeant been more important. For in today’s operations, especially military operations in other than war, the actions of our lower level leaders can define national policy. These full-spectrum operations will exacerbate training challenges.

The Army must evolve current leadership training methodologies to meet the challenges of Army transformation. Interim and objective forces systems require much more understanding and proficiency on the part of NCOs. Doctrine is changing as these smaller, lighter, more flexible systems are developed. Legacy force doctrine and training requirements may remain much the same until the Army is transformed fully to the objective force. Soldiers potentially will be responsible for very different tactics, techniques and procedures.

More than ever, sergeants need to know how to work together. With budget cuts and training curtailed by real-world operations, training becomes more critical and there isn’t time, or resources, to “redo” or retrain. Consequently, we all must do a good job the first time. This doesn’t mean we should have a “zero defect” Army; rather it means we need to do a better job training.

Emerging technology is revolutionizing warfighting and demanding new training methods. The ground combat Soldier will not disappear, nor will the need for trained, competent leaders and trainers. In today’s Army, with increasing reliance on science and technology, even combat leaders must be technically savvy.

Commanders at all levels must support their NCOs as they grow. Leaders must hold NCOs accountable and responsible, but, in turn, must give them accountability and responsibility. We cannot afford to expect NCOs simply to respond to orders as did their forefathers. They need to know and understand the “hows” and “whys.”

**NCO qualifications.** The NCO should have general skills, including the ability to evaluate people and information and to communicate effectively. The NCO must understand large and complicated situations. Seeing the “big picture” means making cognitive connections and balancing its diverse components. Further, he must understand technical, organizational and social relationships. This requires some degree of socio-political sophistication. Enlisted leaders must adapt to political and technical situations while adhering to the Army’s traditions, doctrines and missions. They must be aware of the joint and international nature of military planning and operations and be free from Army parochialism. Additionally, while they may have to relate professionally with allies, they should avoid politico-military interchange.

We expect our NCOs to be versatile and demonstrate job motivation consistently. We expect them to exercise creativity under the capable leadership of professional officers. A professional NCO must have a wide range of knowledge and absorb new data and concepts quickly. Also, he must lead and motivate his charges through patience and intellectual leadership. Persuasion, not orders, is often the best motivational strategy. Finally, today’s NCO must obey his superiors and bring his best judgment as a military expert to bear on Army policy decisions.

Individual on-the-job productivity exercises personal attributes, such as ability, motivation, physical coordination and other job-specific skills. But how do commanders measure potential productivity? Civilian employers who lack information on the potential productivity of job applicants may use various proxies for these skills. According to David K. Horne in his book *The Impact of Soldier Quality on Performance in the Army*, education may be an indicator of productivity if individuals learn skills in school which may be applied to the job.

**Civilian education.** Sergeants’ first priorities are to lead, train and care for their charges. The competitive nature of

the Army, however, demands that they obtain the added edge that continued education provides.

Education is an important and integral part of military life. It sharpens skills and abilities and maximizes individual potential that, in turn, may affect promotions and career development. Educational experiences in the military classroom and on the job are only one small part of the educational opportunities provided to today’s Soldier. In fact, at most Army installations, Soldiers can earn a college degree without leaving the post. Soldiers should not view their tours in the Army as time lost. In fact, increasing emphasis on higher education seems to ensure that Soldiers taking off-duty college courses stay competitive in the promotion arena.

The Army takes its commitment to education seriously. More importantly, it is committed to the development of the individual Soldier. Through various programs, the Army can fund a Soldier’s civilian education. Soldiers who take advantage of these opportunities will earn college credits, promotion points, and eventually, college degrees (See Revamped GI Bill Benefits: education opens doors of opportunities on Page 21).

Limited education puts limits on where individuals go with their lives. Civilian education enhances the individual’s personal and professional value. This is important in the military, not so much for a “check the block” entry on his service record, but as an individual accomplishment. Higher education puts additional tools in an individual’s “kit bag” and these tools help in the performance of everyday duties and increase the individual’s self worth. Civilian education facilitates one’s ability to grasp abstract concepts and to apply rational problem-solving skills. Higher education increases thinking skills and encourages imagination, innovation and vision.

When we talk about how outstanding our Soldiers are, we need to keep it in context and understand what we really are saying. Soldiers are smarter because of education. Civilian educational initiatives are important to the professional growth and development of the military. But they present challenges to retention. Anecdotal information from NCOs indicates dissatisfaction with perceived

college requirements. Some feel those who have invested in civilian education may have better chances for promotion, but while many attend classes during duty hours, not all NCOs have the opportunities to take advantage of these courses. Secondly, the fast pace in most units often precludes any expectations of stability to allow attendance.

Senior leaders should place greater emphasis on civilian graduate education for our NCOs than in the past. NCOs, regardless of military occupational specialty, should be encouraged to attend civilian graduate schools. Specialist career patterns could provide selected NCOs with the opportunity to attend civilian schools and gain expertise in their fields. Civilian education should not be viewed as a luxury or limited to a certain number of slots annually. Nor should it be programmed rigidly into a Soldier’s career pattern.

Commanders and supervisors should allow Soldiers to exploit the Internet. The Army is making great strides in providing education opportunities via the Web. Interactive training courses need to be widely available on the Internet, and these courses should be interactive, not be just documents posted on servers.

First, these can provide self-development mechanisms to introduce outstanding NCOs to the skills needed for their jobs. Distance-learning mechanisms can help those NCOs acquire necessary skills. Second, for those NCOs who mastered the needed skills on the job, the NCO education system can adjust to give up-front proficiency testing and enhanced curricula. Simply put, they learn before attending classes.

As the Army moves more and more toward distance education, NCOs will have to solve problems. Automation and its infrastructure are not inexpensive. Operational tempo may impact the Soldier’s time to learn on the Internet. Therefore, will Soldiers be expected to participate during non-duty hours or will commanders authorize time during the duty day? Finally, will distance learning relieve the schoolhouse of its training responsibilities while placing a heavier load on the unit and individual?

**New generations.** The pool from which the Army recruits is changing constantly. In some cases, these changes are demographic and reflect the results of immigration and other influences. In other cases, the changes are of a more social nature. For example, generational differences, attitudes and expectations may impose further skill set requirements on the transformed Army and its leaders at every level.

Extensive research in demographics has yielded a wealth of knowledge concerning generational characteristics of “Boomers,” the “X Generation,” and now the “D Generation.” It is important that leaders realize that these are three distinct generations.

Baby Boomers, most of the senior officers and NCOs, grew up during a time of economic prosperity against a backdrop of rebellion and indulgence. Their views were shaped by events such as Vietnam, Woodstock, the Kennedy assassination and Kent State. Boomer childhood consisted of nuclear families. In the work force, Boomers worked relentlessly in pursuit of goals, often at the expense of marriages, family and personal lives.

In contrast to all the attention heaped on the Baby Boomers as they grew up, Generation X arrived on the scene unnoticed. These youths are sometimes called the Slackers, Baby Busters, Twentysomethings or the MTV generation. Generation X developed a cynical, pragmatic, survivor mentality as they experienced a world much less idyllic than their Boomer predecessors. Watergate, Three Mile Island, Operation Desert Storm and Rodney King shaped their thinking in their early years. With Boomer parents overworked



1SG Phillip Pressley, B Battery, 1st Battalion, 113th Field Artillery Regiment, 30th Heavy Brigade Combat Team, talks with an Iraqi army soldier while on a joint patrol, south of Baghdad, June 20. (Photo by SGT Mary Phillips, U.S. Army)

focused on accomplishing personal goals, Generation X children often were neglected and overlooked (See Geoffrey T. Holtz's book *Welcome to the Jungle*).

The "D Generation" (digital generation) are those who were born in the computer age. They are familiar and comfortable with automation. They enjoy spending hours alone with their computers and form electronic relationships with others.

These differences are significant. Add to them the cultural diversity that America has experienced in recent decades and the leadership challenges are daunting. Leaders, by necessity, will need to apply new, innovative techniques to lead and influence Soldiers. More importantly, dealing with these circumstances during the turmoil of Army transformation may impose yet more consternation on junior leaders, who will be comprised of generational mixes.

**C**onclusions. Despite today's uncertainties and challenges, the outlines of future operations within the new world order are emerging. Military force is one instrument among many that the U.S. likely will employ. It is clear that the military's role has changed in conducting U.S. foreign affairs. The Army likely will continue to deploy forces, often as part of multilateral coalitions, for specific and achievable purposes. Forces probably will be more dispersed, and commanders still will be held accountable for needless collateral damage. Second, the rate of technological

change in the decades ahead will be much greater than that of the past decade and will continue to accelerate.

Together, these trends will alter traditional concepts of professional military expertise, making it more difficult to distinguish between warriors and non-warriors, commanders and non-commanders, and technicians and non-technicians. Future military operations will require competencies outside the realm of traditional "military expertise" as well as a level of political and technical sophistication unknown and not wielded by past military leaders.

In many respects the NCO Corps is in better shape than ever. As a result of a sophisticated development system, NCOs are better educated and more highly motivated. They display great pride and confidence in their duties. NCOs today are better trained and more professional than at any time in our history. The NCO Corps is comprised of professional volunteers who are highly skilled and technically and tactically proficient. They will continue to be the backbone of the Army. To do so, they must have continued training, education and responsibilities.

**R**ecommendations. What should Army leaders do to strengthen NCO Corps professionalism and to guarantee success during and after Army transformation? First, our senior leadership needs to adopt a comprehensive development plan to direct and guide efforts to educate and train future NCO leaders. Second, the Army should publish leadership development guides focused on 21st century leadership requirements. NCOs do not need generic checklists, but guides for building future leadership teams. Third, the Army should work with sister services and other defense agencies to create career-broadening opportunities that include NCOs. Lastly, NCO leader development should be a regular topic at senior officer planning sessions.

Commanders must be concerned about their units' performance during their watch. But they also must learn to give sergeants their missions and then avoid the temptations to tell them how to do the mission or to require them to check in constantly with status reports.

In return for enduring the hardships of military life and fulfilling the obligations of a professional Soldier, Army leaders must give our NCOs career opportunities and a reasonable modicum of security. The Army Officer Corps should strive to support the NCO Corps by stressing traditional military values and clarifying the meaning and importance of military professionalism, selfless service and absolute integrity. We, as leaders, must include NCOs in the decision-making process, whenever possible and appropriate, and increase the NCOs' input into key decisions. This is not to undermine the chain of command, but rather to broaden the base of knowledge, expertise and experience supporting our decisions.

Senior leaders must mentor NCOs realistically. Officers need to sit down with their NCOs and talk with them, but not as if they are being counseled. Mentoring is not performance counseling, nor is it the required monthly or quarterly counseling. This is merely an officer taking an interest in the life of a subordinate.

If the Army intends to remain the world's most capable and respected fighting force, every member of its leadership teams needs to have an unprecedented range of skills and breadth of experience to bear on his responsibilities. The Army's transformed NCO leadership is being shaped today and it will mature over the next decade. Without the active involvement of today's senior leadership, tomorrow's NCOs will not meet the challenges we will face in the 21st century. ■

This is a reprint of Lieutenant Colonel Frederick J. Maxwell's strategy research project for the U.S. Army War College. It has been edited for length and *Fires* style and format.